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SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/W, INR/AA

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: KINGIBE OUT, DEFMIN AHMED IN AS SECRETARY TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE FEDERATION

REF: A. ABUJA 1671

1B. ABUJA 1670

1C. ABUJA 1063

Classified By: Charge d'affairs Walter Pflaumer for reasons 1.4. (b & d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On September 8, a press release from the Presidential Villa announced that Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF) Babagana Kingibe had been fired, and was to be immediately replaced by Minister of Defense Mahmud Yayale Ahmed. Ahmed's successor at the Ministry of Defense (MOD) has not yet been announced. Observers have expected Kingibe's exit for some time, given his reputation for scheming and disloyalty; Ahmed has long-term ties to President Yar'Adua and is known as a solid, steady bureaucrat. These changes, coming on the heels of major changes at Defense Headquarters and in the Presidential staff (reftels A & B), could be the beginning of the long-expected shake-up in Yar'Adua's administration. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On September 8, Presidential spokesman Olusegun Adeniyi announced SGF Kingibe's immediate sacking and his replacement by DefMin Ahmed. Kingibe is known as a schemer who first came to public prominence in the mid 1980s, when he built the People's Democratic Movement with the President's elder brother, Shehu Yar'Adua. Kingibe was also Vice Presidential running mate to Moshood Abiola, whose 1993 Social Democratic Party's victory was nullified by Ibrahim Babangida's government; since then many observers believe Kingibe has never relinquished his aspiration for Nigeria's highest office. He has also held the positions of Foreign Minister, Minister of Internal Affairs, and Minister of Power and Steel under subsequent governments. Apparently chosen to compensate for Yar'Adua's lack of experience in governing at the Federal level, his downfall may have been precipitated by being "always engaged in nocturnal meetings with politicians ... and leaving his work undone," as one press report said, and, specifically, for allegedly plotting with former Chief of Staff Abdullahi Mohammed to remove Yar'Adua from power due to poor health. Per reftel C, Mohammed himself retired in June, but is widely believed to have been forced out in a bid to purge disloyal staff members.

13. (C) Ahmed hails from Bauchi State and attended Ahmadu Bello University in the 1970s, where he and Yar'Adua were students together, and, like the President, he holds a traditional ruler's title. Despite having served as Head of Civil Service under former President Obasanjo, he maintained

a reputation for being honest, unambitious, and independent, and is not regarded as belonging to any of Nigeria's political networks. Believed to be well-liked by the Northern political elite, he had an indifferent tenure in office at the MOD, but likely had a role in the August reshuffle of the Chief of Defense Staff and Service Chiefs. Many observers believe he will provide Yar'Adua with disinterested, if not effective service.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: It is not yet clear whether the long-awaited sweeping cabinet shake-up has begun, if this a continuation of the significant but incremental change in personnel of the last few months, or if this removal of the most powerful personality in the Government is merely a show of strength after the weeks of uncertainty following Yar'Adua's hajj-cum-major medical crisis in Saudi Arabia. The question may be answered soon, as September 10's Presidential staff meeting would be a likely venue to announce further changes. In any event, Yar'Adua's consolidation of power to date remains slow and reactive. And if Ahmed was viewed as having any strengths at all during his tenure at MOD, they were his diplomacy and quiet managerial skills -- abilities that will likely serve him well under Yar'Adua -- rather than his desire to make defense policy or directly challenge the top brass. End comment.

PFLAUMER